

Inositol is a six carbon sugar alcohol which is a component of membrane phospholipids. It influences the maturation of organs and cell function. A controlled trial in Finland (*New England Journal of Medicine* 1992;326:1233-9) has shown that when inositol was given to premature infants with the respiratory distress syndrome who were receiving parenteral nutrition their mortality was reduced, the lungs of the survivors were less damaged, and they had a decreased incidence of the retinopathy of prematurity.

*What better source could there be for advice on the treatment of Lyme disease than the medical practice in Old Lyme, Connecticut, one of the sources of a review in the "American Journal of Medicine" (1992;92:396-403)? Three regimens are recommended—azithromycin, amoxycillin and probenecid, and doxycycline. Drug eruptions commonly complicate the treatment with amoxycillin. Ten days' treatment is recommended for patients with simple erythema migrans, while those with evidence of disseminated disease need a course lasting 20 days.*

An analysis of all the 207 fractures of the proximal femur sustained by women in the Framingham study from 1948 to 1987 (*Annals of Internal Medicine* 1992;116:716-21) has shown that smoking did not appear to affect the risk; but further analysis showed that the protection given by oral oestrogen replacement after the menopause was not apparent in smokers. The report adds the comment that the known antioestrogenic effect of smoking may possibly not apply when the drug is given transcutaneously.

*On top of its antioestrogenic effect smoking seems to have other effects on the female genital tract—as shown, for example, by its association with cancer of the cervix. A report in "JAMA" (1992;267:2062-6) has now suggested that smoking may increase susceptibility to HIV. A study in Haiti found that the risk of infection for smokers was 3.4 times greater than that for non-smokers after correction for all the known confounding behavioural factors.*

When the first plasma vaccine against hepatitis B became available in 1982 the consensus seemed to be that it would prove too expensive to be of practical value where it was most needed, in poor countries in Africa and Asia. Ten years later (*Gut* 1992;33:576-9) there is a recombinant vaccine too, and steps such as local production and bulk purchases by governments have brought down the cost of both types to \$1 for one dose. Furthermore, the hepatitis vaccines may be given as a single shot with polio, diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis. If there is a peace dividend that seems an excellent way to spend some of it.

*Pirates are in fashion this year, what with the film "Hook" (this is not a commendation) and an exhibition at the National Maritime Museum. So "Medical History" has shown excellent timing in publishing (1992;36:187-206) an account of the ships' doctors who accompanied the buccaneers. Apparently doctors, unlike the rest of the crew, were not slaughtered after battle; they were simply recruited to the winning side. Certainly doctors were needed; in addition to the hazards of sea and land battles the villainous crews were also challenged by the high morbidity and mortality from malaria, yellow fever, and gastrointestinal infections.*

Lucky the university that has a share in a commercial moneyspinner. If, as seems likely, the United States Food and Drug Administration gives its approval to the marketing of tretinoin cream as a treatment for wrinkled skin (*Science* 1992;256:607-8) then Professor Albert Kligman, who introduced the drug as a treatment for severe acne, and his academic base, the University of Pennsylvania, are both expected to earn billions of dollars in royalties.



*Folklore asserts that the dog is often chosen in the master's image. This pedigree Irish setter was bought by a man aged 22. A routine examination showed that the dog was missing one testis. The owner's alarm was compounded when, having been prompted to self palpation, he found only one testis in his own scrotum. At operation a testis was removed from the inguinal canal.—NANU GREWAL, medical student, LARA SITTAMPALAM, house officer, department of surgery, Southampton General Hospital, SO9 4XY.*

If Minerva had varicose veins that needed surgical treatment she would go to a full time surgeon rather than entrust her legs to her general practitioner (who does not, in fact, do minor ops). So she is worried about the trend for general practitioner's to tackle ever more surgery (*Fundholding* 1992;1(11):16-7). The abolition of the "gifted amateur" surgeon was one of the main planks of the early NHS.

*Women who use barrier contraceptives are known to have lower rates of sexually transmitted diseases than those using hormonal contraceptives or no contraception. What may be less well known is the suggestion in a report in the "American Journal of Public Health" (1992;82:669-75) that a diaphragm may be more effective than a condom in reducing the risks for the woman. Use of a spermicide seems further to improve the protection. This is the sort of topic on which clear, factual data ought to be available by now, but apparently—as always—more research is needed.*

The high rates of coronary heart disease in South Asians are most easily explained on the basis of an inherited tendency to insulin resistance, which leads to both heart disease and a rate of non-insulin dependent diabetes four times higher than that in Europeans (*British Heart Journal* 1992;67:341-2). The most effective ways of reducing the risks of both coronary heart disease and diabetes in Asians seem likely to be control of obesity and increased physical activity. Prevention campaigns designed for people of European stock will miss the target.

*"An accreditation team from the Royal College of Psychiatrists had commented unfavourably and insisted on improvements but these were being resisted by unit managers because of cost"—a chilling quote from an audit of electroconvulsive therapy in two NHS regions published in the "British Journal of Psychiatry" (1992;160:621-37). The report records much improvement since 1981, but the training and supervision of those who give the treatment were still thought unsatisfactory, and only half the units had the most effective machines.*

Estimation of the gestational age from the date of the last menstrual period is most likely to be inaccurate in women with long or irregular menstrual cycles, and an editorial in the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* (1992;99:280-2) recommends that these women at least should have an ultrasound examination before 18 weeks to pre-empt any guesswork if the pregnancy seems to be going beyond term. Is there any reason other than expense why all women should not have an ultrasound examination early in the second trimester?